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Madagascar Natives, South-East Coast.

Our Madagascar Mission.

BY THE REV. J. PEILL.

OF all our L.M.S. Missions, that to the Island of Madagascar has been, perhaps, the most inspiring; for it has in miniature repeated the history of Christianity i the early centuries of our era.

Madagascar is larger than France, of which nce 1895 it has been a Colony, being nearly 1,000 miles in length, and 360 miles in width at its widest part. It lies off the S.E. coast of Africa, and, in its geographical features, is an epitome of that Continent. The Hova people, once the ruling race, still by far the most intelligent and civilized tribe, inhabit the central plateau of the Island, and the Capital, Tananarive, a city of 60,000 inhabitants, is 4,500 feet above the sea.

Our own Society was the first to carry the Gospel to the Malagasy people. The Mission at the Capital was commenced in 1820. The Hovas were at that time a purely heathen people, fetish worshippers, bedecking themselves with charms, believing in witchcraft, the power of the evil eye, poison ordeals, lucky and unlucky days, and in divination, which they had learnt from the Arabs. They were ancestor-worshippers, they practised infanticide; a people steeped in superstition, regarding the unseen as the source of calamity and disease, to be propitiated with gifts and sacrifices. They had no written language, and little, if any, regard for moral purity.

Our Missionaries took to these people no purely other-worldly Gospel. The salvation they preached embraced the whole man—body, soul and spirit; and so among them were skilled artizans who taught the people to work in wood, stone, iron, leather, to build houses of brick, to make tiles and soap, to print and bind books, as well as trying to introduce better methods of agriculture, and of weaving cotton and silk cloth, introducing at the same time many useful fruits and vegetables.

For sixteen years these Missionaries laboured—learning the language, preparing school books, teaching, translating and printing the Scriptures, preaching—calling a Christian Church out of heathendom. Then the work was tested :—" The rains descended, the floods came, the winds blew and beat upon that house, but it fell not ; for it was founded on the Rock." The Missionaries were all expelled the country, and it was twenty-five years before they were allowed to teach in Madagascar again.

On one dark day, in 1849, four Malagasy Christians were burnt alive, singing praises to God amid the flames, while fourteen others, after being rolled in native mats and dragged through the streets amid the execrations of the mob, were hurled over a precipice to the west of the Capital Hill, steadily refusing, one after another, to take the heathen oath that would mean a denial of their Lord. Thirty-seven preachers were sold as slaves that day, over a hundred Christians were put in irons, and two thousand were fined. During those twenty-five long years of trial native Christians were stoned to death, speared, put in irons, poisoned, sold into slavery, heavily fined, degraded to the ranks, banished—" persecuted not accepting deliverance."

The passive is the most commonly used mood of the Malagasy verb. It is typical of the national character, whose strength has always lain in patient endurance. Once more, through suffering, the Nazarene triumphed.

THE ROYAL IDOLS BURNT.

Ranavalona II., the first Christian Queen, came to the throne in 1868, and in September, 1869, the Royal Idols were publicly burnt. Then the people, following their Queen's lead, burnt great numbers of their own fetishes too, and a new chapter was opened. Christianity, no longer persecuted, now became popular and fashionable. Soon, instead of by hundreds, the so-called Christians were counted by thousands, myriads even. Everybody was a Christian, suddenly converted by the Queen's conversion : nothing new, this, after all, in the history of the Church. It was " a nation born in a day." What kind of Christianity much of it was, how superficial, how interested, how merely formal, may easily be imagined.

It would, however, be as foolish to under as to over estimate such a mass movement as this. It was a great parting of the ways in Malagasy Church history. Its evils were many and glaring ; but a wide and effectual door was thus suddenly opened to the Missionaries and real Christians of Madagascar. Chapels rose as by magic in every town and village in Imerina, schools were started wherever anybody could be found to teach them ; missionaries were hurried out to organize and oversee the work :—the harvest truly was plenteous, but the labourers were very few. The land was divided out into districts, over each of which a European Missionary was placed, with native evangelists, pastors and teachers under his charge.

In charge of one such district, as large as Lancashire, two young Missionaries were placed in 1873. There were eighty chapels in it, but not a single school. After seven years' work the day schools counted seventy-seven, with 7,000 scholars on the registers, and at the examination held that year, 1,500 of these brought Bibles or Testaments, 1,700 slates, and 1,300 could read intelligently, while all were examined in Scripture Knowledge, and all these books and slates had been bought by their proud possessors—not given to them. This was but a type of many another district. By thousands the young Malagasy were absorbing the elements of Christianity in the day schools and learning to read the Word of God. Slowly the light grew. Heathenism, abolished by law, but still entrenched in the hearts and habits of the people, was gradually giving way. Constant preaching and bible-class teaching did much, teaching daily in the schools perhaps more, and these were steadily carried on for years.

In our College at the Capital evangelists and pastors were educated ; at our Normal School teachers were trained ; by means of our Mission Presses a pure native literature was created and circulated ; at our Hospital doctors, nurses, midwives, were taught ; through our widespread system of bible-class teaching a truer knowledge of Scripture became general among the adults ; every Mission Station was a powerful centre of uplifting influence for a wide district. Then, as the scale of intelligence rose, better houses, better clothing, more civilized surroundings, became a necessity, and trade followed the Missionary.

"First the natural, afterwards that which is spiritual." With a knowledge of the rudimentary facts of the Christian religion came a clearer conception of the importance of character and conduct in the worshipper. Repentance became more real and vital. Spiritual awakenings followed. Confessedly a powerful, intellectual and civilizing force, the Missionaries were seen to be a great spiritual one too. Nationalism in conversion gradually changed to individualism in conversion. The people were now no longer moving in unthinking masses, mechanically and without knowledge. They were being individually born from above by the power of the Holy Ghost.

YEARS OF GREAT PROGRESS.

During these quiet years of progress Mission stations had been established in the Betsileo and Antsihanaka Provinces, at Mojanga on the North-West, Farafangana on the South-East, and Tamatave on the East Coast. We had in 1894 thirty-one European Missionaries and five ladies, 1,459 churches, 1,020 native pastors, some 7,000 native workers, 60,000 church members, and 283,000 native adherents. We had 97,872 scholars in our day schools, while certainly not less than 100,000 natives had been taught to read the Scriptures. The whole work had been systematized and was gradually becoming more self-supporting. Ten native Missionaries, supported by the native churches, were preaching the Gospel in the still unevangelized parts of the island. Sunday school work was being carried on on a large scale.

Again the work was tested—this time from without. The French Conquest came in 1895, and a great heathen uprising to drive out the foreigner in 1896. 750 Chapels were destroyed, 500 of them connected with our Mission. Many of our evangelists and best Christians suffered the loss of all things, some of them their lives, because of their resolute refusal to join in this heathen insurrection. M. Laroche, the first French Resident General, freed all slaves with a stroke of his pen.

Put down with a firm hand by General Gallieni, the new Governor-General of Madagascar, this rebellion was succeeded by famine, with its thousands of victims. Then the scourge passed, and again the land and the Church had rest. The people returned to their villages, rice fields were replanted, Chapels rebuilt, schools re-established, all through the ravaged districts. At our request the French Protestant Mission sent out Missionaries, and ultimately half our districts, and for a time all our schools, were handed over to their charge.

Mr. Evan Spicer, J.P., and Dr. Wardlaw Thompson, came out as a deputation. Misunderstandings, already beginning to pass, were, it was hoped, now finally dispelled, and the Governor-General, who began by bitterly opposing our work, became friendly, so that for a short time we even had Government grants for our schools, according to results obtained.

In 1906 M. Augagneur succeeded General Gallieni. He soon showed his bitter hatred of all religion, and closed fully nine-tenths of our day schools. A militant agnostic, by every device he could think of he endeavoured to prevent the spread of Christianity to the still heathen parts

of the Island, and to oppose its influence where it was already deeply-seated, even going the length of encouraging the revival of heathen practices among the natives.

M. Picquié, the present Governor-General, went out to Madagascar in October, 1910. He gave our Missionaries to understand that his policy would be more friendly than his predecessor's. We trust that his deeds may accord with his words. The closed Mission Schools however still remain closed.

It is most gratifying to find that, in spite of all the difficulties of the past ten years, during that period 1,833,000 books and pamphlets have been distributed from our printing press in the Capital, of which 41,741 were Bibles, 60,770 New Testaments, 131,525 Hymn Books ; that there are 10,000 more copies of the Scriptures in the hands of the Christians in Imerina now than ten years ago, 12,000 more scholars in the Sunday schools, and that the total annual native contributions have gone up nearly £1,000. The pressure from without has drawn the various Protestant Missionary Societies more closely together than ever before, Special efforts are being successfully made to secure a more efficient pastorate for the churches, interdenominational Commentaries are being prepared for the use of the preachers, a common moral code, to guide the various Missions in matters of discipline, has been agreed upon, and our own Mission and the friends have joined in forming a Union Theological College.

We have nineteen men and five lady European Missionaries on the staff of our Madagascar Mission. There is a vast field unoccupied, for two-thirds of the great African island is still heathen to-day, and most of the Churches in Imerina and Betsileo are still in their infancy. Services can be held wherever there are Churches, and Sunday school work is being greatly developed.

God is bringing good out of evil. We dare not faithlessly give up His work when it so much needs our help and sympathy and prayer, and the French Protestant Mission, short both of money and of men, begs us not to think of further withdrawal now. It is not the first time the Church in Madagascar has passed through the fire ; and now, as in former days, the trial is proving to be God's preparation for a yet more glorious advance. We must remain faithful to our trust, and leave the future with Him.

A Native Teacher with her Class.